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ABSTRACT

This study compared 105 women university baccalaureates intending graduate study the year following graduation with women graduates matched by age and major who did not intend such study. Aspirers had significantly higher GPAs than non-aspirers, were more satisfied with their undergraduate major, had more often selected their major as preparation for graduate study, and were more decided upon their intended occupations. It was concluded that career education efforts be strengthened for pre-major freshmen and high school women to assist them in exploring career alternatives, potential college majors, and the vocational ramifications of selecting a major. (Author)

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Factors Related to Postgraduate Educational Aspirations of Women College Graduates

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Abstract

This study compared 105 women university baccalaureates intending graduate study the year following graduation with women graduates matched by age and major who did not intend such study. Aspirers had significantly higher GPAs than non-aspirers, were more satisfied with their undergraduate major, had more often selected their major as preparation for graduate study, and were more decided upon their intended occupations. It was concluded that career education efforts be strengthened for pre-major freshmen and high school women to assist them in exploring career alternatives, potential college majors, and the vocational ramifications of selecting a major.

Factors Related to Postgraduate Educational Aspirations of Women College Graduates

There exists an underrepresentation of women in professions requiring postbaccalaureate education such as medicine, dentistry, law, and college teaching. The fact that a smaller proportion of women than men undergraduates eventually attend graduate or professional school results from a myriad of causes as various researchers have noted (e.g., Chalmers, 1972; Oltman, 1975; Ekstrom, Note 1). While discrimination in admissions practices hopefully will decline, there remains a second major source of this underrepresentation--the lower level of aspiration for such education on the part of undergraduate women when compared with undergraduate men. This current study intends to focus upon the educational aspirations of the final class of undergraduate women, the graduating seniors.

Surprisingly, literature concerning the educational aspirations of graduating seniors who had been surveyed near the time of graduation is scant. The existing studies have all documented the fact that a greater proportion of male than female baccalaureates anticipate postgraduate education (Davis, 1964; Thistlethwaite & Wheeler, 1966; de Wolf, Note 2). Davis and Thistlethwaite and Wheeler as well as Wilson (Note 3) have all reported that the most powerful variable related to postgraduate degree aspirations for both men and women baccalaureates was prior academic achievement.

Another body of literature, concerning the nontraditional career aspirations of women college seniors, is also relevant in this context. How are educational aspirations and nontraditional career aspirations related? Tangri stated that graduate school plans were "...normally a prerequisite for Role Innovative occupations [those employing fewer than 30% women]" (1972, p. 180) and Almquist's (1974) data supports this statement. Aspiring to a nontraditional career can therefore be considered an indirect measure of postgraduate educational aspirations for senior-year college women.

In the above studies women aspiring to nontraditional careers differed significantly from those senior-year women who aspired to traditional careers in three important areas: they reported that a non-familial adult had influenced their choice of an occupation (Almquist) or academic major (Tangri), they had had a greater number of jobs in a wider variety of occupations (Almquist), and they were more work-oriented or career salient (Almquist & Angrist, 1970).

The present study focused upon selected collegiate and vocational variables which, on the basis of the above findings, were hypothesized to be related to graduate school plans for a group of women university baccalaureate recipients. It was hypothesized that aspiration for graduate study would be positively related to (1) prior academic achievement as measured by undergraduate grade point average (GPA), (2) reporting favorable interaction with the faculty, (3) work experience, both paid and unpaid, and (4) being work-oriented, i.e., having a higher degree of certainty concerning intended vocational field.

Method

Sample. All baccalaureate degree candidates for Spring 1974 in the College of Arts and Sciences (A & S) at the University of Washington (UW) were requested to complete a "Survey of Graduating Seniors" (Educational Assessment Center, Note 4) during the three months following graduation. There was a 56% return rate, 898 graduates of whom 46% were women, a proportion comparing closely to that in the entire graduating class.

Of the total group of women respondents, 105 (25%) indicated that their most probable activity the year after graduation was graduate study. These women, called aspirers, were paired by computer selection with another 105 women graduates, called non-aspirers, matched by age and major. The average age of the aspirers was 25 years, a year older than that of the total group of women respondents. The aspirers significantly differed from the total sample of women in the distribution of major fields ($\chi^2 = 15.18$, $df = 4$, $p < .005$). They more often came from social science fields (45% of the aspirers versus 32% of the total) and less often from "miscellaneous" majors which included physical education and home economics (3% of the aspirers vs. 13% of the total). In the remaining three major groups, arts, natural science, and humanities, the proportions were about equal (approximately 10%, 15%, and 30%, respectively). Among aspirers the majors represented by the largest number of women were, in descending order, psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

Survey. The "Survey of Graduating Seniors" (Educational Assessment Center, Note 4) contained 37 "items": 5 were of a biographic nature

(e.g., age, major), 3 were open-ended questions on specific courses and instructors considered to be most or least valuable to the student, and the remainder were multiple choice. In addition, certain other data were gathered from UW scholarship records (ex., entering GPA, cumulative UW GPA). A report describing the survey and analyzing the data in terms of sex by degree group (arts, social science, natural science, humanities, and miscellaneous) may be found in de Wolf (Note 2).

Statistical procedures. The responses to the survey items were analyzed using χ^2 analyses with the frequencies of the aspirers employed as the "expected values." Correlated *t* tests of mean differences were also used.

Results

Hypothesis 1. Supporting the hypothesis, prior academic achievement was strongly related to postgraduate educational aspirations. The aspirers had a significantly higher cumulative UW GPA than did the non-aspirers, 3.47 versus 3.16 ($t = 5.58$, $df = 104$, $p < .005$).

Hypothesis 2. Again, supporting the hypothesis, aspirers more often indicated being favorably influenced by a non-familial adult, in this case member(s) of the faculty. That is, to a survey item asking "Which one of the following made the most important contribution to your education?" the aspirers (19%) more often selected the "faculty members" alternative than the non-aspirers (8%) as the facet of college life which "made the most important contribution" ($\chi^2 = 22.45$, $df = 7$, $p < .005$). The other 7 alternatives were courses (major, required, or elective), fellow students,

directed independent study, field experience, and "learning on my own."

Hypothesis 3. The two groups did not differ on any of the work experience survey items, contrary to the hypothesis. Exactly the same proportion of aspirers and non-aspirers (45%) had had some paid work experience related to their intended occupation and nearly all reported having 1 year of past work experience. Neither were there significant differences between the two groups on the amount of unpaid work experience.

Hypothesis 4. The final hypothesis was also supported. Career salience or work-orientation was determined by the percentage of women omitting a response to the survey item inquiring "What is your intended occupation?" Aspirers, being more career oriented, i.e., more certain of their intended vocation, were less likely to leave this item blank ($\chi^2 = 35.49$, $df = 1$, $p < .005$). Only 5% of the aspirers but 17% of the non-aspirers listed no intended occupation.

There were no specific hypotheses for the other survey items, the remainder of which were also analyzed for possible differences. An interesting pattern of responses between the aspirers and non-aspirers emerged for four items which concerned the undergraduate major: time at which the major was decided, reason for selecting the major, emotional feeling toward major, and satisfaction with choice of major.

No difference arose between the two groups on the "time" variable, the bulk of students having decided upon their major during their second or third year (about 61%). However, the reasons given for selecting the undergraduate major did distinguish the aspirers from the non-aspirers ($\chi^2 = 58.13$, $df = 2$, $p < .005$). Responses to the question as to why students

chose their undergraduate major were grouped into three categories: personal (e.g., "for personal growth reasons"), preparation for career at the bachelor's level, and preparation for graduate school. The analysis indicated that the non-aspirers more often selected their major for personal reasons (68% vs. 49% of the non-aspirers and aspirers, respectively) or as preparation for a career at the bachelor's level (17% of the non-aspirers vs. 5% of the aspirers). Aspirers more often selected their major as preparation for graduate study with almost half (47%) of the aspirers choosing this option in contrast to only 16% of the non-aspirers. Although the groups did not differ in their degree of emotional attachment to their major (about 25% of each group felt a "strong, positive attachment," and approximately 50% indicated that they "like it but feelings not strong"), there were significant differences between the two groups in their degree of satisfaction with their choice of major ($\chi^2 = 17.40$, $df = 3$, $p < .005$). Aspirers more often indicated that they were "very satisfied" than did non-aspirers (55% vs. 39%). Eliciting the same response pattern was the survey item asking "If entering college today, would you choose the same major?" Almost 75% of the aspirers answered in the affirmative compared to slightly more than half of the non-aspirers ($\chi^2 = 18.25$, $df = 1$, $p < .005$). Among the non-aspirers who indicated that they would not have selected the same major, 78% indicated that they would select a major "of more immediate vocational use."

Discussion

The most important unpredicted differences found between aspirers and non-aspirers were two: reason for selecting the undergraduate major and

degree of satisfaction with the major. Aspirers were apparently more vocationally aware than the non-aspirers when selecting their major (i.e., 52% of the aspirers vs. 33% of the non-aspirers selected their undergraduate major either as preparation for a career at the bachelor's level or as preparation for graduate study) which might be a major factor in the greater amount of satisfaction with their majors. In contrast, about two-thirds of the non-aspirers selected their majors for personal reasons, in contrast to under half of the aspirers, and also indicated greater dissatisfaction with their choice. An overwhelmingly large proportion of non-aspirers who were dissatisfied with their choice indicated that, if they had the chance to select their major today, they would choose a major of more immediate vocational use. What then are the implications of these differences?

It seems that the non-aspirers might have profited from assistance in selecting their major. Perhaps non-aspirers were less aware of the vast array of career options available to women. What seems to be needed is improved career education specifically designed to assist "pre-major" college freshman women, i.e., those who have not declared a major. It would be even more ideal for such career education programs to be offered at the high school level. In addition to discussion sessions focusing upon career options, vocational interests, and college major other innovative approaches could be employed at the high school level such as granting elective credit to high school women who complete internships in a career field of interest or perhaps awarding credit to high school women who write

papers based upon interviews conducted with women employed in an area of career interest.

Another recommendation concerns the need for more research concerning the educational aspirations for advanced study of women baccalaureates. The relationships between educational aspiration, actual entry into graduate school, and attainment of an advanced degree should be explored in depth via longitudinal surveys. The current study was intended to increase the slim body of literature concerning women baccalaureates' educational aspirations as measured by a narrow indicator of such aspiration--intentions to enter graduate school the fall immediately after graduation. It should be noted that the non-aspirers in this study were not devoid of graduate school plans with about 78% indicating an interest in pursuing graduate studies eventually. Is there a difference in the attainment rate between women baccalaureates who pursue postgraduate studies immediately after the reception of their bachelor's degree and those women who intend to pursue such study "sometime in the future?" This question is one of many which deserve serious consideration in future studies.

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